Interview with Bruce Martin, afc2016037_04041
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Interviewed at Long House Funeral Home in Cherokee, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan and Will Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

[00:00:00 – 00:03:10: Chatting about Mr. Martin's family.]

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you to introduce yourself for the camera, and would you talk a little bit about where we are?

Bruce Martin: Okay. My name is Bruce David Martin, Jr. I'm in, we're at Long House Funeral Home in Cherokee, North Carolina. This is 2017, and I'm in a building, in a facility, that used to be a schoolhouse, that we chose to repurpose into a funeral home. This is not solely my endeavor; this is actually something that we came by by my mother, Nancy Martin, and my father, Bruce Martin, Sr. Just a little bit of note on him, we lost my father, Bruce Martin, Sr., two years ago, June 19th of 2015, after about a two-and-a-half-year battle with cancer. So we continue on, and think of him often. So that's how we kind of come to it. But my mother Nancy, she continues to run another business that my father had started, in the security field, and so she does that for her own livelihood, things, and so she's still tied into that business. Without either one of those folks, this wouldn't be. Although I'm the acting agent, the funeral service provider, funeral service licensee, I'm able to operate the business. Without their input and being there, we wouldn't have seen this. Back to this building, built in 1935, it was originally a community school building for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, children from the grades of ages I think somewhere around five or six on up to about 11 years of age. So that would have been a first-grade through a sixth-grade level of school. Once they finished school here they would go to the central schools in what we consider the downtown Cherokee, central school system.

[00:05:00] I think this building operated as a school from 1935 to I think maybe the mid-'60s, and at that point in time it was repurposed into—not much different, but a daycare. And I think a lot of those community schools did the same thing. So the early-childhood education kind of occurred here as well. And I believe that went on for, I think, probably a couple more decades at that point in time. The building returned back to the original ownership of the land owners, I believe somewhere maybe about the '80s or so, and then it became just a dilapidated state. Just through searching and needing a home for Long House Funeral Home, my folks looked at this property, decided to work with it, and that's how we ended up being here. So we actually spent I guess probably the better part of four and a half years working on it to get it where it needs to be and to its condition where it is now. So we've redone the inside as much as we can, and then the outside, the façade, remains work to be done, but we do not maintain that or won't be doing that until we maybe own the building. So that's where

we're at here. But it makes a good home. It's of historical value, and so it kind of relates to the community. People who have been here, they have actually come to funeral service that we've had and they've recounted their days as children being in this building. And so that means a lot of those folks had to walk I think many steps, as far as away I think as maybe about three-quarters of a mile across these mountain peaks just to come to school, as kids. And so vastly a different time, different days, for those kids, as far as being here.

SB: Would you tell us a little bit about your parents' background?

BM: Sure. Bruce Martin, Sr., started out, he graduated here, Cherokee High School, in 1966, and I think he actually signed up during the draft status period to go into the military out of high school. And so he would choose, I guess, to go into the military on his own and volunteer, and somewhere in that period, he was on his way, I think it was maybe what we know as the military entrance centers, he was phoned by the people here. He had applied to be a police officer before he left, and so they phoned and said that they needed him here, because he was going to be a police officer. So he returned home before he ever made military active-duty status. So his early days, in the late '60s, early '70s, was as a patrolman police officer. He eventually made the rank of the Chief of Police here in Cherokee, and then somewhere in those early days of the early '70s, he was approached by the local marshal service out of the Buncombe County, Western North Carolina, district, to be a special deputy. And so Bruce Sr., I guess he just went ahead and told them yes. They did all the paperwork, and so he was drafted into a status of a special deputy of the US Marshal Service. So that was just so that they could basically conjoin and shorten down the process of serving summonses and subpoenas and arrest warrants and things like that to what is the Cherokee reservation, because it's a federal level of documentation to get anybody into those courts. So it just sort of shortened that process. Later in the '70s, they actually approached him, he qualified—I think at that point in time there were eight officers, or eight positions, from anywhere in North Carolina that could be approached, and so Dad was one of those. I think it was in 1977, they got together and they were talking him—and the numbers may not match up right—but I believe it was in the early '80s, 1980, I believe, he graduated from the FBI Academy. And so he kind of held a little position there as the first full-blooded Native American to hold that position, to graduate from the FBI Academy. And so that was always told as his little claim to fame. And so he continued that, and he opened a security company. He ran his duration of his law-enforcement here. He later became the community director, which he was the community service director, and I think he was over the fire, police, and sanitation departments. And so he kind of collectively (moderated?) those groups and those—I guess probably your fire chief, police chiefs, and public works individuals, overseeing that. He left that position, there was some turmoil that went on in Cherokee, turmoil all over the United States, he chose not to continue on in the Eastern Band government, and so at that point he opened up a private community security firm.

[00:10:00] And so that grew to be a pretty prosperous thing for him today. And that continues on today as Qualla Security, Incorporated. And so my mother continues to operate that. Bruce Sr. was stricken with cancer in the early days of March of 2013, which he fought to the last day, I guess, and that was June 19 of 2015, when he lost that battle. But we buried him—but we continue on with him. But his early days, he was always Eastern Band of Cherokee, so he grew up right here on the reservation, and locally has always been thought of well about, these folks. He and our family share a divided culture background, because he is Eastern Band of Cherokee, his father was a, I guess, a resident of Arizona, and so some of that was never, I think, confirmed as far as things go, but they knew that the history was there. So some of our blood quantum includes Navajo, and what we affectionately know as Papago, or [pronounces Papago differently] Indians from out west. So that's my lineage there; so I'm Eastern Band of Cherokee, and then a quarter Navajo and a quarter Papago from out west. My mom is Nancy Martin. She is a what we consider a first descendant. She is not my biological mother, but she is my mother and has been since I was probably about four and a half years old. They married when I think I was six, and I have an older sister, I think she might have been around going on seven. So 1978. Nancy is from Cherokee County, which although it shares the same—a lot of people don't recognize the difference between Cherokee, North Carolina, and Cherokee County. And so Cherokee County, although they do house a group of Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and a community representative there, it's not physically attached to this group here as far as physical landmass. Mom, I think she graduated high school in 19-, I want to say '70, you'll have to forgive me on that. But she attended Lenoir-Rhyne, I think for a year, here in North Carolina, and then returned back to Western North Carolina University. And she has subsequently gone back to school a couple more times, and she holds a couple of Masters degrees. One is in Laboratory Technology, one is Environmental Health. And so she worked through the what we know as the Indian Health Services, which was the local hospital here. And so that, there was a dissolution of that agency through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and so it goes now, what we have now is the Cherokee Indian Hospital Authority, which is run through the hospital. And so they still house those employees of the Indian Health Service. And so she worked through them, I think 19 or even 20 years, as a laboratory tech. And then locally here we have a Haywood Community Hospital where she worked as a supervisor for a lab as well. And so she's educated in that medical field and does really well, and probably could return to that should she want to. But she chose, in those days, (?). 1990, 1991, I graduated high school, they started the security company, and she chose to go onboard with him to do the admin portion of the business that they ran in the security field. And so that's where they ended up. And so she's been doing that for the most part ever since. So, until we lost him. And she continues to run Qualla Security with my younger sister in the last couple years or so. They both together had the idea—I think it might have been my mother's—of a funeral home. And it simply came to be, because my mother had attended a funeral service of a friend, which we say off-reservation, in the county where

she was from, and I believe then in close days she went to another funeral of a coworker, employee, in the hospital system, and she said it was such a vast difference between the two services that it really upset her. And so she decided somebody needed to do something, a funeral service where there was more, I guess, honor given to that individual. And treading on the cultural background part of things, I guess, is where I'll go with this, is that when that person she saw that was a friend off-reservation, that individual received all the hoopla, all the grand rites and rituals granted anybody in a really respectful funeral service; and the one person that lived on the reservation here, I think he might have worked in the janitorial service in the hospital—no different from the other person, however, his service was really poorly done. And so it really upset her to the degree that it settled on her, and so that kind of was the background of the beginnings of this Long House Funeral Home. And so the way that went, she spoke to my father and they talked about it a little while.

[00:15:00] And so simply back in I think the spring of 2003, I was finishing up a Bachelor's degree myself, I had gone back, I was 27 so I was an older student, and so I'd gone back to school and I was finishing up. And so I'd continued on this quest that I'd made in my mid-20s. I'd said, "Well, I need to do something for myself," and I fully thought that I was going to work with Bruce Martin, Sr., in the security firm, so I thought, "Well, I'll go with a business degree." I have a background myself in EMS, so emergency medicine, and so EMS, intermediate EMT stuff is what I had been doing. And so I thought, "Well, this is kind of a skew from that, so I'll go with the business degree." I went and got an Associate's degree, just in applied science, and I though, "While I'm doing this I might as well go ahead and do something more for myself." So I decided to go to the (?). So that kind of cued my mother in, she said, "Well, we need to do something more." And so I was actually putting out resumes, in this area and locally, as far as that goes. I'd finished up my Bachelor's program, and I came back home, I was living in Asheville, North Carolina at that time, and I came home simply to apply. In Vonore, Tennessee, there's what they call the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, in Vonore. And so my father says, "Well, if you want to ride over, we'll take your resume over, and we'll drop it off and see where it goes from there." And so we did that, and I almost immediately heard back from them, that they said, "We don't want to stress you out, but we want to inform you that that position has already been filled, and so we didn't want you lingering about." And so I was just setting at home, sitting at the dinner table as a matter of fact, and she looks at me and she says—and I'll tell you this right here, they call me Cricket. Everybody in Cherokee, North Carolina, has nicknames, and so mine affectionately is Cricket. That was a separation, instead of calling me Junior, or Little Bruce, they called me Cricket. And that kind of comes from my Grandma Martin. And so that in Cherokee would be Ta-la-du.[1] And so, Ta-la-du, that's Cricket, so that's how they translate. So my grandmother says, "Cricket, have you

[1] □□□ in Cherokee syllabic characters

ever thought about opening a funeral home?" And so I think my thoughts then were just, "No. I've never thought about owning a funeral home." So she kind of told me the story about her two friends, and how the services played out and how they were vastly different. And so that did concern me, and so I said, "Well, I'll think about it." So I went home, and over the next couple weeks I researched it, thought about it, and looked into the funeral service. And so my answer was, "Well, somebody's got to go back to school." She said, "Yes, we do. I can do it," she says, "but I'm getting a little too old to do it now." She says, "Your dad's a lot older than I am, so it's too old for him." And she says, "Your younger brothers and sisters, they're just too young to be interested," she said, "so it's me or you. I'm looking at you." So for two more years now—I've just finished a Bachelor—I went back to school again and went to mortuary school, which I attended at Norfolk State University in the state of Virginia, in the Virginia Beach area, Hampton Roads and stuff. I did an internship there for two years, and subsequently school at the same time. So then I returned, I think I was licensed in the state of Virginia and then I returned to North Carolina. And so I shared, through reciprocity, through the training and time I've had, went ahead and got licensed in the state of North Carolina. So that kind of started us into the backings of the funeral business here. But kind of, to backstep on that, while I was going away to school, Bruce Martin, Sr., and my mother Nancy, they kind of got into the process of looking for a place where we could actually open up a funeral home, a viable building or at least somewhere we could build something. And so we settled in this building here, mostly because it was affordable at the time. It was large enough to house what we needed to do, and there was a historical value of it, so we knew if we brought some of the history back to this building that maybe we could get back some of the help from what we know as the Preservation Foundation of Cherokee. And so their process, of the Preservation Foundation, is to seek out places where they can apply funds to it, money, the grants, to where they can put money to it and try to pull back and get back together Cherokee, Eastern Band of Cherokee, in its ideals and our values and how we operate as a community. And so through that group we found basically what we call the Sequoyah Fund, and the Sequoyah fund is the monetary group of that organization, that seeks out businesses to loan money to. So that's how we got the money to go ahead and try to build up Long House Funeral Home. And so that's kind of how we did with them. And so that's how Bruce and Nancy Martin, although they're not qualified funeral personnel, they're way more than qualified admin-wise to do what they needed to do business-wise. So that's how I ended up being the qualified agent, by being in school. But they had the business sense to kind of get things going.

[00:20:05] So that's the story of Bruce and Nancy Martin.

SB: Do you think that the background that you and your mom both have in medical training had something to do with why funeral service would come to mind?

BM: I think so. And even more than that, I think it's the background of the service—the service industry. Bruce Martin, Sr., since he started that security company, he was servicing the community. So he had to concentrate on the ideals of that. My background on that part of things, service, is I started as a 13-year-old kid, started as a busboy, did that for two weeks, and then all of a sudden started waiting tables. So early on I learned to deal with the general public. Then my mother, working through the hospital system, always was talking with the general public. So us three altogether had this background of service industry. And for a long time, I think I—actually I was in the United States Army, and so when I came out in 1994 is when this kind of started, this business of the security stuff started happening. And so that's where I was at that point in time. So my being able to talk with people and deal with people allowed me to be able to go out and be a supervisor for my father at his security company. I'd go out and do a lot of the jobsite personnel interviews, and then subsequently supervision of those, all over the state of North Carolina to some degree. So that's kind of that thing. And so the medical background part of things, yes, it is. Although my mother never really entered the funeral part of things, she did the admin. All the way back to high school I was in the health occupations classes, which they had HOSA, Health Occupations Students of America. And so in those classes I learned medical terminology, and if I had to shout out to anybody, my high school instructor name was Miss Hess, and she drilled those terms into us. And so I was able to go through—even if I don't have a clue what I'm actually doing there, just the medical terminology clues me in on it. I've actually passed many tests without having to study for them just by knowing the medical terminology and how to put it all together. So it helped me in the training and stuff. And the EMS part of that, seeing the trauma, seeing that happen to people, whether it be a heart attack all the way down to a car wreck or anything in between, just showed me a lot of stuff about the trauma. So that kind of helps me. I am geared to do it. If there's anything hard in this business for me to do, that's hard to deal with, it's the psychogenic shock or issues, or any psychosis, or anything that happens as far as far as family members go through losing a loved one. That's hard to deal with, because it's hard to know what to say—because a lot of times there's nothing you can say. You just have to do the process that you've known to do, and you go through it, and you kind of show those families you care by the service that you put out there for them. Because we deal with so much, because it's young deaths, and sometimes it's suicides, it's overdoses, sometimes it's sudden deaths from conditions that somebody didn't have, car accidents, things like that. You know. And so it's just really tough. Those are hard to deal with. But form me, internally, I'm geared, and I can do the physiology part of things, the embalming—I'm okay. That doesn't bother me. I don't have to skip around and cut corners to do what I need to do. That part, you know, I'm okay with that. And that I think is why mother, when she first asked me, was something she first saw. She said, "Well, you're geared to do this. Are you able, do you think you could do that?" Because she knew that would be a hard process to do. And all the way back to her medical background, she says, "I'm a laboratory tech," but I think what she was getting at as she didn't think she could do what I would be able to do. And that's kind of how it worked out.

SB: That articulates much better than the question I was going to ask next, which was how you make that step, from somebody who's—you know, even in a medical field, to working with deceased people's bodies, that that must be a hard transition for people to make.

BM: I want to say, in a real sense, it may be, because I'll tell you from the standpoint of the students I worked with, went to school with, you have individuals—and some of those other people you may have interviewed—I mentioned this, I think, before we started the interview, which is that we all come from a background of just average people doing other jobs, doing something, and seeing a need for a operation to come to be so that we can service the community.

[00:25:00] And so I had my own ideas about it, and my mother had them and my father did. Each of us had our own ideals. But whenever I got to school, those individuals that I went to school with were people that had already been in the funeral business, or their great-grandpa started the place. It was the sons and the grandsons of the people that started it. That's kind of where the firm I worked for, they were really family-owned and –operated, but everybody in the family had been in the business for a really long time, where we hadn't. So you had those established people, I'll call them, who had their— People who work in the cosmetology field end up in the funeral business, and I think that's because they're called for their services at that time of need. Somebody passes away and they need somebody to help out, just apply makeup. Do the hair—barber techniques, they would see that. And then some of the other people were other service-oriented folks. A masseur. I think we had a masseur in class, that was interested, because some of the techniques that you use in embalming, you actually massage a body to get the process to where you need it to be. And then people that are in the church. If they're the deacon of a church or people like that, if they touch close to a funeral during that time, those people see that there's value in helping in some way, and then others see the value, "Well, I can help to serve this person, and still have a job," something, you know, to make a living at. And so that's kind of how that worked out. So we just come straight from, I'd say off the street—from other backgrounds, service-oriented-minded folks that, we just kind of jumped into it. But some of those people, the, "I've got the idea, but can I do this?" Funny story. We were in I think a second embalming class, and I won't mention any names, but the girl's probably far gone from the business anyway. But we were in a hands-on clinical time where we were actually working with a body. I think the instructor—I had been working with a large firm, and we did 1,500 calls a year, so by my experience alone I was kind of the leader in that class at that time, just because of the experience. And so he asks me, he says "Bruce," he says, "would you mind, shadow So-and-So, and just watch her technique?" I said, "Sure." And so we got started, and we started doing our things, and I think in some of that process she had to make incisions on the body, obviously; she made her first incision, and then she decided she had to excuse herself to the restroom. Well, I

waited for about 15 minutes, and then 20 minutes went by, so I finally took all my stuff off, went to go see her, and not only was she gone, but her car was gone also, and that was the last we saw of her. So that just kind of defined for me that point that I can do this, and I'm geared to do it, but not everybody is able to do it. So that kind of brings it down to, in a population of 15,000 people, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, they all don't live here on the reservation, among this community we might have seven or 8,000 people—you might have more data on populations—but it's grown since we have the casino; I'm actually one out of all those people, Eastern Band, enrolled member, that I know of that's involved in the funeral business, that's operating, doing something. I've got a couple of people that are trained, but one of them, Brian, is a funeral director, but he's not an enrolled member. And I've got a trainee, Maggie, she's a first descendant. And kind of going back to that, I mentioned it before, a first descendant defined is anyone who is born Eastern Band of Cherokee, their mother or father might have the blood quantum to be on the roll, but they just fall on the other side of that line so they don't have the blood quantum to be an enrolled member. And so they're notified as first descendants. Maggie, so that's what she is. So she's still training, I think, and finishing up. By the end of this fall season she'll be licensed to operate. But still, although we're in this community, I'm still the only Eastern Band member that I know of who's got the qualifications. So when you spread that out across the country, in each community there's just a few people in that. And so I think that boils down to it's not so much that nobody wants to go into it; you have to be able to handle the funeral business psychologically, then you have to be able to handle it physiology-wise, as far as the body goes, and be able to put it together and deliver that in a service to people, so that you can kind of take care of it.

[00:29:47 VIDEO cuts out while camera battery is changed] So that's the way it works out. So to answer that whole question, when we started out, I think we started out about 15 students; six of us, I think, ended up taking the actual state exams, three of us actually went on ahead to do the funeral business. So that lets you know how that kind of works out.

SB: How do your work—both day-to-day and big-picture, in terms of mission—different, being an Eastern Band of the Cherokee member, than it would be for a funeral director or mortician of another background or from another community?

BM: (Sighs) I think we, when we started this funeral home, our ultimate goal, our mission, was just simply to deliver service of integrity and honor to our enrolled members and the surrounding communities. We didn't ever want to out anybody, non-enrolled members. I have a non-enrolled spouse. My dad, although Eastern Band, my mother is a non-enrolled member, essentially.

[00:30:50 VIDEO resumes] And so we really didn't want to out anybody, but our goal was to simply deliver a funeral service to this community. It operates in a [HOPE?]

zone, a historically underutilized business zone, so Cherokee, per-capita-wise, Swain County, Jackson County, of Western North Carolina, have always been on the bottom rungs of per capita income across the state of North Carolina. And so a lot of that in these poorer communities, that translated to they didn't get as much service level, and so they just got the kind of mediocrity stuff that happened. So that was our goal, and that still continues to be the goal, is to just simply deliver a simple, well-rounded funeral service to our enrolled members and our local community. And ultimately the future goal would be to try to spread that out. If we can, we mentioned the Snowbird Community[2] which is not physically attached to the main body of Cherokee, it's about 48 miles away, 60 miles, depending on if we bury you in that community. They're separated, and we eventually want to try to bring this together with them, although we still service that community. We're not physically there but our establishment, we'd like to open up maybe a secondary possibility, smaller chapel there, that we could utilize to serve that community. And maybe into Cherokee County as well, and not just that, but maybe to spread into these other areas as well. And kind of go and deliver service that we know what we tend to think of as mountain community people would like to see. It's hard to do that also because what we'd ultimately like to do is keep the cost levels down, and that's hard. Anybody you've probably talked to in the funeral business, nothing's designed for the funeral business, everything that is designed for the funeral businesses, they don't give it away. So you know everything costs a lot. So we try to do that. So the main body of that is going to be your caskets, vehicles, things that are specifically designed for funeral business. We try to purchase and maintain our equipment so that we don't have to pass that higher charge on too; so we try to maintain a competitive level pricing, but in regards to our local community and incomes, as far as the families go here. So that's ultimately, to continue a good service, a simple service, and not more than we really can handle. We just want to keep it simple. If we want to Get everything new, it's stuff that everybody else has. Viewable screens, technology, and iPads and things with announcements and things on them. But ultimately we just kind of want to keep it simple. Come in, not oversell anybody or undersell them, just keep it a good, simple, respectable service.

SB: How would a Cherokee person's funeral be different from a person of another background?

BM: There's not—well, there are some differences, but not a lot when you go across—I'll speak to it in a broader term. We're in this part of the country where we're known as being in the Bible Belt, so vast services are delivered by the Protestant religion; meaning we have a very small Catholic background. The rest of that will be your Protestant-based religions. And so over time, since the introduction of Anglo cultures from other places—Columbus landing, thinking he discovered India—from the time of the

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[2] The Snowbird Community in Graham County is home to a population of Cherokee Indians, but is not a part of the Qualla Boundary (Cherokee tribal lands).

introduction of other people, a lot of the cultural ideals, things that make us Native Americans, just to include—the Eastern Band of Cherokee includes all these other nations—a lot of their history was decimated. Whole, whole, whole groups of people were gone. In comparison, I won't quote anything on this, but just simply I read in some literature that during the Holocaust of the Jewish population, six million Jews were gone, and eradicated.

[00:35:00] The upper estimated numbers were somewhere around 50 million Native Americans across the country, and I would assume continent. We'll put it down into Central America. Whole cultures were decimated. So what that translates down to is there was a lot of things lost. So speaking now back to the Eastern Band of Cherokee, when we do funeral services, I don't see a lot of differences between what a regular Protestant—Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian—any other type of services, other than what that religion dictates. So there might be some dogmatic stuff that's followed or not being the church doctrine or something that somebody in the church put together. There's not a lot of difference there, so what difference there are are what people have drawn out of other Indian cultures. And so you might see drumming ceremonies, but it might mock what an Apache, Arapahoe, or a Navajo, or some other culture, might do at their funeral service. So you might see that here with ours. And so there's been such an ingrained background of other cultures together that we've lost a lot of that. One I can kind of related to, this comes from the Western Band of Cherokees. Now, they maintain some of the backgrounds, but nowadays we're almost separated by two different peoples. We're the Eastern Band of Cherokee, they are the Western, although we have that common, familiar background and history. We had an individual come and they did what they called a, loose terms, rewind ceremony. And that was done in private. And so when we did this it was myself and another enrolled member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee that was working with me. We were able to go to this little spot. And it essentially was what we affectionately call a stomping ground—a little ceremonial spot where they had their each little kind of a lean-to type structure for each of the seven clans. And so they had this ceremony that happened in that they would go through the process of seven circles, as far as the life of this individual, and then a reverse of that. And so it was kind of like grounding it back to zero. That was just kind of undoing everything that was done, kind of reverse, and so that individual was then able to go ahead and go on his path to the next spiritual creation, or dimension—everhow you want to look at it and see it. I am myself of a Christian background, I believe in the Holy Trinity, God and Jesus our savior. That's where my background is. And so I tend to look at a lot of stuff from that aspect. So there's not a lot of differences, other than we allow anybody to do what they want to do. So there's things called cleansing ceremonies—you all might be familiar—people will burn different plants, sage is one of those, a known product, and they will maybe cleanse the house. If they can't do it inside we'll do it outside. They'll do it in each corner at sunset and burn the sage, clear the air. And those rites and rituals kind of tie into other cultures, and which you may have talked to these other funeral directors. So many of those are tied into

spiritual aspects of funeral services. We see the military fire the rifles over the body. That's just simply to frighten away any spirits that might linger about. The Chinese take a sweet something into their mouth, candy or something like that, and that's simply, "We're going to leave this cemetery and not leave a bad taste in our mouth about this." So there's a lot of little things that we do here that represent something like another culture. Catholic religions, they burn the incense. They go around, the priest or the clergy will go around the casket and burn the incense. Same situation, they're clearing the air, so to speak. And so those all operate in the same sense of, this is what we're doing for this body. I know you all commonly have probably come across the term "wake." And so they simply sit through the middle of the night, and wait to see if that person's awake. Simple things like that. Here in Cherokee, they did a thing where they used to sit for three days, and they simply call it sitting-up. And so they would sit with the body throughout that timeframe. Much of that would be because so many people had to walk from where they were. So it was simply that. They might not be able to do a service in a few hours. There are some timeframes. So now today, one thing here that I will do that is different from bigger firms and other places from us, is we allow a little more time. So commonly, their service might last one and a half, two hours, maybe, top. Ours might last from three to four to five hours, or two full nights and days.

[00:40:00] So you know, there's a lot that we try to give, as far as cultural respect to our individuals and allow them to do what they want to do, which could include a cleansing ceremony, a drumming, or anything else. We have individuals who still speak Cherokee, and so they might deliver, alongside a English-based sermon, they will deliver also in Cherokee. Or maybe have a translator in between. Outside that, the burials pretty much remain the same. You go from here to a gravesite, we lower the casket, there's not a lot of differences there. The only thing might be that here in Cherokee, we actually are still able to bury on our own private property, so to speak; although it's property held in trust, and so each individual, we each have it. I have property, so and so, other people have property, but that being held in trust, it's still in that family's name but we don't actually hold deeds to the property. And so, but we are still allowed to bury on our property. So commonly, instead of burying in the cemetery, I will literally bury in someone's possibly backyard, or on their property somewhere like that. So that is a difference in today, modern-day sense of, I guess you say, Indian or Cherokee goes. There's not a little difference but it's just some tidbits here and there.

SB: I saw on your website about the mission of the Long House Funeral Home, being partly in memory of the people who died on the Trail of Tears—is that the appropriate term?

BM: It is, it is Trail of Tears. There were those, they used—I think modern-day terminology was the Five Civilized Tribes, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole and the—ah, there's one other—Creek, I think. In that timeframe when the removal happened, Eastern Band of Cherokee came in to being because there were

those individuals who came along the Trail of Tears, being sent to Oklahoma; I think first they went to Etowah, Georgia, or another place. They were gathered up, basically in stockades, by the military, gathered up with all these other Indians, and then they were marched along these different trails. So the Cherokees' was known as the Trail of Tears. There are other stories similar to those from other tribes. Ours came to be recognized because we have a play, one thing, an outdoor drama that occurred that kept that story alive. But the simplest version of it is our people were removed from here, and when they went, I think probably half of them, or at least a third of them, died along the way, as of sickness and poor health, probably poor nutrition, the elements. They were just, gathered up I would think whatever they could carry. So if you could kind of put yourself into that frame of mind, somebody come to your house, grab you up, just say, "Grab what you need," and then grab it and then go. And simply, you didn't ride in a car, you walked. And so that was such a big thing. And so my mother, she really thought about that a lot, so she really wanted to kind of dedicate it to the people that made this happen for us. And those people are the ones who returned, or that hid out. They're those folks who went to the mountains here—of course there's a lot of rough terrain, that were able to hide out. And so there was a fellow tied into that, Will Thomas, who actually had property, and was able to hold deed in the simplest form, went out and purchased property. And so being in contact with those other individuals that were hiding out, and then some of those actually I guess left and returned here. I think the numbers were somewhere in the range of 600 people that returned. They were able to put themselves together and eventually be recognized as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. And so that's where we kind of sprang from. And so she dedicated it in the memory of all those people. My dad had always talked about that, because there's a area not far from here in the Cherokee County area, Tatham Gap, where they marched people across. He always, he said he would think about it as a child, being a young boy, he said, all those Indians with nothing, coming across that in the cold mountain air, just walking away from their home, forced to leave.

[00:44:40 VIDEO pauses] And when you think of that it's a really sad story. You know, just picking you up and just forcing you out of here. I even had an instructor ask me at one point in time—we were talking about sociology, funeral business stuff, but I think I was in a Bachelor's program at that point in time—and she actually said, "Has any of this class ever been oppressed or anything? I don't think you have." She said it like that. And I kind of raised my hand, and she says, "Bruce, what do you have to apply to that?" And I said, "Well," I said, "I'm Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians," I said, "so my—although me, myself, I have family that literally come from an oppressed society."

[00:45:15 VIDEO resumes] And so I believe that, and so part of the reason I'm here is that funds from the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, they're funding me to be here to go back to school. And so the good parts of some of that was that I was able to go back to school and it was paid for by our Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. So I borrowed

probably thousands of dollars in student loans anyway. I had pretty good backing. So that's the good things about Cherokee, the students here, and the people that live here. Enrolled members have a lot of opportunity to go ahead and continue the education of themselves. Just the sad part is still a small amount of us go ahead and do that.

SB: What are your plans for the future of your work?

BM: Hopefully to keep going. I hope, I pray my health holds up. I pray I'm able to continue on and grow the business. I had mentioned briefly we thought about other locations, and I think that's probably key. We are still a little bit in limbo in this location. If the ownership settles one way or the other, it'll dictate how things progress for us here in this school building. If not, we've made plans, I have done this from the beginning, we have an embalming facility, which is simply a doublewide trailer revamped and tooled so that it's a embalming facility. But the good part is that we can put some tongues on it and drag it down the road if we have to. We had planned that from way back, so if we don't continue here, we can still, what I'll call the meat of the business, I can still pull that right out of here. As long as I find a facility I can go ahead and open up another location and just be ready to go. So that's kind of how it works out. But the ultimate goal is to try to continue to gain as much interest from our people here, and then move further out into the other communities. And when I say other communities, I'm not just saying on the reservation, I'm talking off-reservation, into our surrounding counties. There are already established funeral businesses, so I have to go from the business side of things, I would still have to kind of step into a probably saturated market that's already out there. And so, getting back to my niche market, that's here, that's the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, I want to try to take care of them as best I can, but ultimately that's my goal, is to find some other place to open up and do it again. Now, whether the ingredients are there to do it again, I don't know. It would probably be my mother and myself. When we started this thing it was including my dad. So there's a lot to be said in that process, of all three of us thinking alike and kind of going down the same road together.. And so this would be something different. So I might choose to try to take my associate there, Bryan—Bryan is a funeral director, his name's Bryan Aldridge, he's from the Tuskegee [Tuckasegee?] area of North Carolina, which is in the Graham County area, Fontana. And so he's a licensed funeral director, and so if he's interested maybe Bryan and I could find something else to do. Bu that's the ultimate goal, is to try to continue on this place. I have thought about opening up another, newer facility, so that might be the next step, before we step off reservation and go somewhere else, maybe make a new, modern-day facility outside this building here. But this facility has turned into such a—it's got a lot of character to it, people really appreciate it. So it's hard to kind of see exiting this place right now, because it's just been home for such a long time now. We are in our eighth year, so when we finally opened up, I think we were incorporated in 2008, but actually first services were done in around mid-July of 2009. So the way I can, not count for that, is my father's birthday is July 10. We actually had our open house on July 10 of 2009. So that's how I can kind

of keep the numbers together. So when I count the number of years or months together, it's not the calendar year, it's up to this month, actually this month that we sit in right now, as far as actually being open eight full years. And so that's our goal. We had hoped to be a little further along on the outside plan of going somewhere else, we were just delayed with the cancer with my father. So that put a big I guess brakes on a lot of things.

[00:50:00] So we had to kind of retool and think. So we're kind of in that period now, as far as planning and redirecting where we want to go with it, or getting back up on what we want to do.

[Pause in VIDEO and AUDIO. VIDEO resumes at 00:50:56]

SB: What do you wish people understood about your profession?

BM: Time it takes to get things done. I think if I had to ask anybody, it would be just to consider that, when we start from the moment we get a call, it's about three or four days, at least with us, of nonstop. And so when you back-to-back those calls, it gets tiring. If they just knew the times. Because I know—God bless them, I'll tell them, say, "Do you have a question? Don't sit and wait 'til tomorrow. You call me. Pick up the phone and call me in the middle of the night." People have took me up on it, and I don't mind. But it is tiring. There's a lot. And if people understood how hard we work to get to where we need to be. You can't describe a lot of it. There's a lot of embalming, you can't just go out and tell somebody about their loved one. It's hard. It's hard to communicate. Because there's a lot of times that it's a traumatic death, and you do absolutely everything in your power to make things as good as it can be, and it just doesn't work. You have to tell somebody, "I'm sorry, but I can't let you view, or I can't let the general public view, this loved one, because of the situation." And it's hard, because I'm not going to explain it to you—you know, that kind of thing. There's a lot of trauma involved. So psychologically, they've already suffered, and to do any more damage to them, that's tough. And so if I could just say to somebody, "Just understand that I am completely honest with you, and I tell you, we just can't make this happen," and to be understanding about it. And the time it takes to get it done. I think that's mostly it. When I was in school I think somebody had said the term, it's a hidden profession. And I said, "Well, what's that mean?" And they said, "Well, 90 percent of what we do is behind closed doors." And it is. It's kind of that way. When people walk in and they sit down at a table and arrange a funeral, and then they might go in and they view a body and they do a funeral service, but outside that, all the rest of the stuff, they don't see us prepping the cars, washing the cars, running it up and down the road, doing the certificate of death information, calling back and forth, doing all the things we do—and then, behind closed doors, working with their loved one to do what's necessary so they can have a funeral, and make it, the terminology they say, is make it a—I guess a perfect picture. So whenever you're looking at the funeral in the end, you

have a good feeling about the settling of this. "Okay, well, I can leave here now and know that Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa, they're okay now. Everything's all right." That kind of thing. Sometimes you can't do that. There's some things that's just not able to happen. That's what you wish you could communicate to them, and just say, "This has happened, and I can't correct it, and I wish I could." But, you know, and some people just don't—you don't know. A lot of things take time. And sometimes we don't' have the time to do it, you know.

SB: What is the breakdown between burial and cremation, and also open-and closed-casket services?

BM: On price-point?

SB: Oh, I'm sorry, just in terms of the number of people.

BM: Oh, the number of people that are actually doing it. Here in Cherokee, if I put it, it's going to be a cremation, in comparison—I'll have to compare it to the country—I believe across the country, and there might be some other closer numbers you've had from other people, I think it's somewhere around 65 percent or higher now. Every death that ends in the continental United States, or in the United States, end in cremation. In Cherokee, here, probably five percent. So we have a very low cremation rate compared to the country, and other cultures. And that's a lot to do with our closed little society that we have here. That's something to do with the religious-based aspects of little bit bigger population, I'll call them, some people say the mountain communities. Western North Carolina as itself is a lot of mountain community, and so a lot of the mountain community people tend not to go and want to do the cremation aspect of things.

[00:55:00] And that, whether it be we're kind of still separated from the rest of the country, in aspects of how things are moving, progressing along, culturally it's still almost taboo. I will always have families, if somebody chooses cremation, probably a third of that family doesn't want it. And so there's just decisions. And it does boil down to, I said price-point, a lot of times people will choose cremation and that's where we're seeing it now move to cremation, because of the cost. The difference here is a funeral here—nine times out of ten we'll do an in-ground burial—on the reservation it generally costs about the same, because some of those services that are given by the community, since we bury on our own property, we actually have free labor groups that come out, that'll open and close a grave for an individual. There's no requirements of a lot of the cemetery-based stuff. You don't have a vault, outer burial container, that has to be set. And so there's a lot of things that are saved there. So what it boils down to, a burial and a cremation, and a full funeral, if you do the cremation, it's actually going to line up right with an in-ground burial. So there's not a lot there. So those people that we do might be off-reservation, or someone who lives out of town, or

somebody who's maybe come into town visiting. So those cremation numbers are a lot of times mingled with non-enrolled people. So we have, if I would say enrolled member, Eastern Band of Cherokee, I might even say it's probably two percent. So very, very, very few out of the population choose cremation. Although it is growing. It's a really small, slow rate, as compared to the rest of the country.

SB: And are there, is—are open-casket funerals and viewings, is that fairly standard? I mean, unless it's a traumatic situation.

BM: It is fairly standard to view a body. I'm a real big pusher of viewing, if somebody does a service, for the closure aspect of it. And I think that's real healing, as far as the spiritual aspect of that. But I would say, as you mentioned, outside trauma, just about every single service I do there is a viewing. I've had just a couple of services recently that, I think part of the family said no viewing, and then the other part of the family said, "We do," and so it translated into a full funeral service with a viewing. But I think that's standard here in Cherokee. Inside these, we call them boundary walls, that's almost just a standard funeral. When somebody comes in and they walk through my doors, and they say, "So-and-So's passed away, I need to give a funeral," I already kind of know everything that's supposed to happen before they even— We might work on the obituary. Everything else is almost just laid out there for us, without having to go through the smorgasbord of what's what. They just tell us and it's—and mostly they come and tell us what they don't want, more than they tell us what they do want.

SB: One final question. How do you take care of yourself emotionally in the difficulties that you face?

BM: Hiking. (Laughs) Hiking, and getting away outdoors. I love the outdoors. The good part is that where we're at, situated, in the United States, I'm in a primary to get out and go on these little trails, and these lakes, things like that. And so that, and talking a lot—my wife probably gets tired of hearing me sometimes. I don't have a lot of outlet, a lot of social aspect of a lot of things, and so the folks here, we kind of lean on each other and just talk about stuff. And so it's all kept in confidence. But you have to have humor in it, and so you have to be able to laugh about stuff. So if you don't you get muddled down in a lot of heavy burden, a lot of psychological stuff that will press on you, you can feel it. And in this day and age, to share a little bit with you, in the month of June, we buried about eight people, all of them related to what in the country is known now as the opioid epidemic. And it is tremendously heavy, as far as a burden to carry in dealing with the families. Because these people, there's nothing that seemingly is the answer.

[01:00:02] So that's the hard part. So amongst myself and the employees I have, and my mother, we'll talk. That's where I miss my dad a lot. I could bounce a lot of stuff off of him, and so. We've got a couple of friends that are clergy of different churches and

stuff, and I might call them every once in a while. I've got a couple buddies I'll talk to. I don't share a lot of the stuff, but just get out, talk, conversate, and go find something—movies, I'll get out and we'll watch. Because it is a burden. Yeah. You have to mentally take care of yourself, because if you don't, I could be right along the side of one of these other folks. I could be laid up in a ditch drunk somewhere or something like that. Our cultural background as Cherokee, as Indians, there's a lot of physiology that allows addiction to happen. And so whether that be addiction of alcohol or drugs or anything else—smoking, that's a big bad habit—we're, we have a lot of individuals with diabetes, and so just having diabetes alone is bad enough, but having an addiction problem along with that, it makes a killer really fast. So it's hard. I'll go out and talk, like I said, and share some good times with my family. That's mostly it. Family time. Spend a lot of time with my little boy. I like to see him laugh and stuff. And probably because I speak to him so much, he is articulate in what he says and how he says stuff. So he's kind of funny. I always say it's like talking to a 27-year-old. But that's basically it, just getting out. Sometimes a lot of alone time, you just have to have it. Or at least I do. I'll spend time with people, but sometimes I just want to go be quiet somewhere, and do it that way. So that's where the hiking comes in. I'll go off and find a trail, go off on it for a while, and go two or three hours—if I get time—and do it that way. Because there's just a lot of stuff that you can let well up on you that just would be too much, I think. So you have to mentally take care of yourself. I said I'm a Christian, and so prayer, church, that kind of thing, you know. And I think you have to place that in there, because if you don't, you just keep that burden on yourself, you're just going to—it's going to go south on you. That's where you'll end up at.

SB: There are so many important areas of your work to talk about, I know we could talk for days, but what would you especially like to include in this conversation that we haven't covered?

BM: Oh gosh. I'd have to take a thought about it and think about it. I don't know. I'll tell you what I've learned, and what we should all know as human beings, is that the world is a bad enough place as it is, and I think you should just talk to your family, love your family, tell everybody that you know and love that, you know, that "I love you." Because one thing on a daily basis that I see come and go, and there's a lot of woulda-coulda-shoulda conversation happening. And a lot of it's stuff that could, that didn't need to be. So that, I just see it, and I share a lot of times, I'll end a service and I'll share with the families, I'll basically tell them, I'm thinking of you, I love you, and I'm praying for you. And I mean it. I mean it. I don't say it just because it's something to say. I actually say and mean it. Because looking at their faces and seeing the hurt, and then sometimes you see somebody who's full of hurt, "Just when you leave here, today, just when you walk out and you hug each other, you're sharing in the deepest moment that you might have with anybody else today right now. And if you leave here, you need to let somebody know that. If you don't know this individual and you are a friend of them, and you are a family member, talk to each other about how you did share that

love, how you did come to know that person that we're remembering today." That kind of thing. And I'll say, "Just share that." Maybe love's not the answer, but it has a big part of that. And that mixture, a part of that, was what I mentioned earlier, is religion. And I'll say to people, "Get your God right." And I don't mean (?). Get your mind around your life, and what you think about things, and how you operate with your family, and how you interact with them, and try to remember that a lot of stuff's petty.

[01:05:00] A lot of stuff's unimportant. From my dealings with dad, my mother would say something like—I don't know, messy house. That's unimportant right now. You know, there's more to life than just straightening up stuff, you know. I tend to be obsessive-compulsive, maybe, "That's got to be done just right!" A lot of people get that way. I have to remind myself that there's a lot of stuff that's important, and sometimes this is not important, but it all boils down to relationships, your involvement with your lord and savior, yourself, and doing that type of thing. So that's what, if I've learned anything, it's just that we tend to spend too much time seeking out other stuff than what we actually need to be in. That's just human involvement, engaging each other, respecting one another. You know. And that's probably Miss America's answer, but it's just that world-love, world-peace, you know. And that's that kind of a thing that I will take from it. Because too many times, and I'm not kidding you, I've had plenty of people, went to church, got in there and sat down to start hearing the preacher, and dropped dead of a heart attack. Fellow literally left his wife to take a friend home on a stormy night, because his friend was walking. On his way home, a tree fell, struck the back of the truck, crushed the cab and him along with it. Gone, in an instant. In an instant. And his wife, what she said, she says, "I'm glad I said I loved him when he left out." She said, "I sure didn't think that was going to happen." Nobody does. It just happens that fast sometimes. And that's just the thing, I guess, that just when you see somebody and you love them and they're part of your life, let them know it. Just tell them you love them. That's basically it.

SB: Thank you so much.

BM: You're welcome.

Will Bryan: Thank you so much, that's great.

BM: You're welcome.

[VIDEO ends at 01:07:03]